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TIN BACKGROUND BRIEFING PAPER

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MARTIAL LAW IN LHASA

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BACKGROUND BRIEFING PAPER

MARTIAL LAW IN LHASA - A PREMEDITATED PLAN?

Martial law was imposed in Lhasa from midnight 7th March, after three days of demonstrations in the Tibetan capital. There is considerable evidence to suggest that the Chinese authorities deliberately encouraged the escalation of the demonstrations, that they did not attempt to restore civil order when this was well within their capabilities, and that they had a premeditated plan to impose martial law when there was sufficient perceived chaos to justify their actions.

Provocation rather than crowd control

Throughout 1988 several planned demonstrations were pre-empted by the government flooding the Barkhor with several hundred riot PAP before the intended protest. Some demonstrations were halted when the small groups were quickly arrested and whisked away in vehicles. Yet other demonstrations were thwarted when a line of armed PAP blocking the Barkhor forced the demonstrators to melt into the crowd. The point is that the Chinese have the capability to take immediate control of the situation.

The original demonstration on 5th March was as small and peaceful as previous protests. Through the refined network of Chinese and Tibetan informers, authorities were well aware of the plans for 5th March. Yet there was no show of strength. There were no riot soldiers and no attempts at quick arrests.

Instead, a few police fired directly into the peaceful crowd from the relative safety of a police station roof. There is some evidence to suggest that these policemen were relatively senior and were implementing higher level commands: the police who fired were Chinese aged between 30 and 40, they spoke excellent English and appeared to be in charge of a police station behind the Potala. Further, before opening fire they were communicating with walkie talkies.

Throughout the three days from Sunday to Tuesday several truckloads of armed security forces waited at two or three points within a kilometre of the demonstrations. They rarely moved into the area. There was no attempt until midnight Tuesday to move into the old town and take control. Rather, the tactics were in the nature of 'hit and run' charges - advance down the street firing automatic weapons and tear gas, then withdraw. The tactics seemed almost pointless - unless the aim was to provoke the

protestors. The use of snipers firing from rooftops seems equally provocative and not a crowd control technique.

The main justification for the imposition of martial law was the supposed chaos and damage caused by rioters continuing to rampage through the streets. Certainly, this demonstration was the most violent to date. But it was not an uprising. It is difficult to understand why a couple of hundred well equipped riot soldiers (as seen in Lhasa in 1988) could not have broken up the unarmed crowds. The crowds never ventured beyond the Barkhor area and the 3/4 kilometre stretch of Dekyi Shar Lam. The crowd peaked at about 1500 on Sunday, but then dramatically dropped on Monday and Tuesday to several hundred, many of them children. By Tuesday the demonstration had definitely lost momentum. When the protest was at its calmest and least threatening, martial law was declared.

Martial law as premeditated plan - developments in 1988

The imposition of martial law is perhaps not surprising in light of rumours that the political commissar of the Tibet military district, Zhang Shaosong, wanted to succeed Wu Jinghua as TAR Party Secretary. There is some speculation that during the almost five month hiatus between the apparent disappearance of Wu Jinghua and the appointment of Hu Jintao, the military in TAR exacted some compromise from the civilian leaders which included an understanding that, subject to approval from Beijing, martial law would be imposed at an appropriate juncture.

Indeed, from Beijing's perspective, the declaration of martial law served as an international publicity exercise. It implied that rule of law has always applied in Tibet and that extra-legal methods would be sanctioned only in the most extreme situations, and then only after going through elaborate legal procedures. In fact, the martial law decrees promulgated in Lhasa to a large extent merely legitimise arbitrary police tactics that have always been used in Tibet.

The political commitment to these tactics was made clear in July 1988 when Qiao Shi, during his visit to Lhasa, promised a policy of "merciless repression" towards dissident Tibetans. The imposition of martial law provided the pretext to set in motion and without delay the mechanics of this policy. All foreign tourists and thus any covert journalists were expelled. Between 1,000 and 2,000 Tibetans are thought to have been arrested to date, many of whom were not involved in demonstrations but had been suspected of harbouring unacceptable political views, perhaps many months or years before the demonstrations took place.

The imposition of martial law had as its chief characteristic the demand that all unregistered citizens and visitors in Lhasa should carry identity cards, or risk expulsion. Something similar had been attempted in July 1988 when the authorities tried to register all ostensibly unemployed Tibetans. These moves seem to have been an attempt to monitor and thereby control the

substantial and politically threatening movement of non-residents in Lhasa (mostly pilgrims and traders, said by the Chinese to number over 40,000); the imposition of martial law allowed this policy to be implemented by force and with speed.

In terms of maintaining stability in the city, the use of the army was unnecessary, since a large force of People's Armed Police (said to be over 20,000), including a specially-trained unit of 1,500 riot police, was already active in Lhasa and could themselves have dealt with the demonstrators.

The response seems vastly out of proportion to the threat. On 24th July 1989, the Hong Kong journal "Liao Wang" reported that in a military operation unprecedented in Chinese military history, over 100 civilian flights had airlifted 14,000 troops into and out of Tibet in the spring of this year. Perhaps it is not surprising that on 6th August AFP, quoting the "Peoples' Daily", reported Ngapo Ngawang Jigme as indicating that the authorities have no intention of lifting martial law in the foreseeable future.

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